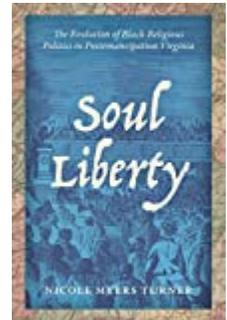


Nicole Myers Turner. *Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. Illustrations, graphs, tables, maps. 223 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-5523-9.



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During the late 1870s and throughout the 1880s, black Virginians experienced an unprecedented series of political victories that, to scholars of Reconstruction, appear tantalizingly suggestive of what the postwar era might have been had the country not reunited under the auspices of white supremacy and black disenfranchisement. Over the course of this decade, the leaders of the successful albeit short-lived Readjuster Party, so named for their belief that the state's debt should be "adjusted," established an effective biracial coalition that united disenchanted black and white Republicans with dissatisfied Conservative (later Democratic) voters altering the course of Reconstruction in Virginia. In 1879, the Readjusters captured the state legislature followed by the governor's office two years later in 1881, the same year it sent former Confederate general and Readjuster candidate William Mahone to the US Senate. Under the Readjusters, freedpeople saw marked progress on their legislative agenda, which included "reducing the debt burden, securing state-funded education, funding a college for black

people, and banning the whipping post" (p. 5). By the end of the decade, Virginia sent the first African American to serve as a member of Congress, the prominent lawyer and black activist John Mercer Langston. According to historian Nicole Myers Turner's insightful and meticulously researched new book, *Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia*, these postwar victories resulted from black community organizing, a complex and strategic process birthed out of black churches, conventions, and seminaries.

In her analysis of postemancipation Virginia, which is largely centered on the Petersburg region and the surrounding counties, Turner mines census returns, local election returns, newspapers, and church and convention minutes, to challenge the prevailing scholarship that views postwar black politics as monolithic and lionizes the political black minister. Through examining the political terrain of the postwar years on the congregational level, she finds that freedpeople pursued "soul liberty," a term that entails "a combination

of religious freedom, righteousness, equity, and justice” (p. 2). As citizens armed with the vote and possessing the numbers necessary to alter election outcomes, freedpeople pursued the strategic goals of their local communities and, in so doing, created a context that allowed for the rise of the political black minister and the consequent marginalization of black women. This latter point denotes a key intervention of Turner’s narrative into a field that has traditionally focused on the male ministerial elite. Her attention to black congregants, especially women, reveals that the rise of ministerial leadership long held as simple fact was in actuality the result of a process, one influenced by the limited theological education black ministers received, an education that promoted black Protestants’ interracial political strategies and the implementation of strict gender roles. As these ministers left the confines of their seminaries to join congregations, they helped establish associations and conventions that proved critical to freedpeople’s political victories in the 1880s. Turner’s ability to track and recreate these “invisible landscapes” (through GIS mapping) that postemancipation black Virginians “carried in their heads” enhances the work and serves as a model for future researchers (p. 8).

Turner breaks down her work into five chapters that trace the progression of minister-influenced black religious politics from their start in the postwar era to their culmination in the 1880s. Chapter 1 focuses on the immediate postwar years and the new relationships freedpeople forged with the federal government and southern whites. Turner highlights how freedpeople used the Freedmen’s Bureau, the most visible and accessible representative of the federal government, to level the playing field and mediate rising disputes with local whites over ecclesiastical independence and separate worship spaces. Contrary to prevailing notions, however, blacks did not always push for autonomy; instead, a variety of complex factors influenced the decisions of each individual community. St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church serves as an

important example where members chose to maintain a relationship with local whites for the benefit of the denomination’s educational initiatives. Attention to gender is never far from Turner’s mind, and throughout the work, she blends in this topic seamlessly. Here she discusses the planting of the Zion Union Apostolic Church in Mecklenburg County, which provides a window into the emergence of ministerial leadership during this period. James Howell, a freeman from the North, moved south after the war and helped establish this church. As minister, he promoted the ideals of Victorian manhood and established a patriarchal relationship between himself and the congregation, a model that would be duplicated not just across Virginia but throughout the South.

Alongside the rise of a visible black church and pastorate arose related associations and conventions that collectively demonstrated black fitness for democracy while also reinforcing gendered politics among Virginia’s freedpeople. This forms the focus of chapter 2 where Turner considers organizations like the Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention and the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association. Her evidence challenges the traditional narrative that blacks merely developed political awareness in the postwar years. Instead, they already had this political acumen from the antebellum period and these conventions merely provided space for their further development. Examining these religiopolitical gatherings through a gendered lens, Turner reveals how they worked to define men’s and women’s roles in a traditional manner. Ministerial and missionary leadership was defined as male, and yet the records reveal the critical role that black women played in the success of these conventions, especially as key fundraisers, which gave them a seat at the table. This revelation challenges historian Glenda Gilmore’s argument in *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (1996) that black women only rose to leadership roles in the late nineteenth century due to the political transforma-

tions taking place, including the disenfranchisement of black men. Turner instead reveals their active involvement as leaders within these associations decades earlier, a reality that allowed them to play a key role in shaping local politics. Collectively, black political consciousness and coordination helped prepare them for Virginia's 1867 election and state constitutional convention where black delegates, although a minority, formed part of a coalition of seventy-two radicals against thirty-three conservatives. Turner notes that "with the numerical majority, the radical coalition was able to pass a new constitution that ended slavery and secured the vote for the freedmen" (pp. 54-55).

In chapters 3 and 4, Turner explores the church and related theological institutions through a race and gender lens to examine the phenomenon of the political black minister. As noted above, Turner argues effectively that the frequently discussed political black minister emerged in the postwar era, a moment that also witnessed the effective marginalization of black women. In so doing, she challenges the traditional narrative that views black ministers as "organic intellectuals" and their rise as inevitable. The new freedom available to blacks in the postemancipation era meant authority, including the franchise, for men and constraint for women. Turner focuses on the example of Gilfield Baptist Church and its minister, Reverend Henry Williams, to demonstrate her point. The development of Williams's Sabbath schools for both adults and children alongside the practices of church discipline proved determinative in establishing strict gender roles for men and women with the latter subjected to the former. Gilfield's leadership prohibited black women from holding meetings in their homes and barred them from bringing charges against other church members. Once included through a communal decision-making process, women became increasingly excluded from the process as a leadership-laity hierarchy emerged. Turner concludes, "Behind the narrative of centralized black ministerial leadership is

the backstory of the suppression of dissent and the marginalization of women" (p. 80). Turning to consider the impact of theological education on this process, Turner considers Branch Theological Seminary and the Baptist Richmond Theological Institute. In the postemancipation era, black students at these schools "brokered relationships with white church leaders and missionaries in order to facilitate black advancement in education" and this in turn explains "why black men as ministers became the central figures in politics more broadly" (p. 82). Collectively these religious institutions worked hand in hand to create the politicized postwar black minister who not only led negotiations with local whites but also promoted a Victorian ideal for black families.

The political power wielded by black ministers and the churches and conventions they led revealed itself decisively in the 1880s with the success of the Readjuster movement and the 1888 election of Langston to Congress. In perhaps her most compelling chapter, Turner argues that the new black church associations not only structured community and identity across counties and cities but also influenced political strategies and the ways black people entered the political arena of patronage so prevalent during this period. This can be seen from the church canvasses conducted by Mahone and the Readjusters in 1883 and 1889, a move spurred by the recognition that "churches were the primary vehicle through which to increase the engagement of black voters" (p. 124). Blacks understood the value of their votes and demanded patronage positions in return for political support, a move that strengthened the Readjusters at the expense of both the Democratic and Republican parties that continued to pursue white southern votes with increasingly less regard for the state's black voters. Through the use of GIS-mapping technology, Turner recovers these "invisible landscapes" and demonstrates that the Readjusters' success depended on these established religiopolitical networks. Turner concludes that "Mahone's

1883 and 1889 campaigns, which canvassed black churches, codifies the political significance of black church conventions and constitutes the final moment of the postemancipation evolution of black churches: the emergence of the church with the soul of a nation, built on the strength of its church networks” (p. 143).

Turner’s *Soul Liberty* offers a concise, compelling, and nuanced account of the postemancipation religiopolitical world that freedpeople made. Her meticulous research allows readers to move beyond black ministerial leadership to gain an understanding of the era at the congregational level; this and her use of GIS-mapping technology emerge as two of the greatest strengths of this history. Indeed, those interested in exploring this political landscape further can do so through the companion website, Mapping Black Religion (<https://mappingblackreligion.com/>). Additionally, her congregational-level analysis debunks the prevailing narrative of a monolithic black community led by a political ministerial elite. In its place, diverse congregations emerge, many comprising women who served as key contributors to postwar religious organizing until the promotion of Victorian standards effectively pushed them to the shadows. One wonders what role the missionaries and teachers of the Congregationalist-led American Missionary Association, which spread across Virginia at the auspices of the Freedmen’s Bureau in the postwar years, had on this process. That omission aside, Turner’s work will prove essential reading for scholars of religion, African American history, and the Reconstruction era. The insights on the interplay of religion, politics, and gender offer clarity to an era that Reconstruction historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. recently described as “one of the most important and consequential chapters in American history that is also among the most overlooked, misunderstood and misrepresented.”[1]

Note

[1]. Henry Louis Gates Jr., “PBS Announces Reconstruction: America after the Civil War, a New Documentary from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to Air Spring 2019 on PBS,” PBS, last modified August 17, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/blogs/news/pbs-announces-reconstruction-america-after-the-civil-war/>.

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